DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 136 RC 022 264

AUTHOR MacEachren, Zabe
TITLE Crafting as Environmental Education.
PUB DATE 1999-10-00
NOTE 8p.; In: Selected Monographs from the Association for Experiential Education International Conference (27th, Rochester, NY, October 1999); see RC 022 262.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Camping; *Creative Activities; *Environmental Education; *Experiential Learning; *Handicrafts; Outdoor Activities; Outdoor Education; *Sensory Experience
IDENTIFIERS *Environmental Awareness; Reflective Thinking

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which "crafting" experiences shape our relationship to and understanding of the natural world. Crafting is defined as the process of making an item that is useful and aesthetically pleasing. Crafting not only involves some handiwork, but it also has the potential for encouraging environmental awareness. Although early youth camping programs explicitly associated handicrafts with nature study, today few programs emphasize the connection. The current focus on technology has distanced us from our artifacts and from the real world. A solution resides in the return of sensory-based experiences and full bodily involvement. Crafting activities are dependent upon sensory-rich engagement and attention to the materials used. For crafters, the deepest connection with nature seems to come from walking into the natural world and using natural materials to create a useful item. Even in an urban environment, a well-developed crafting curriculum can provide a context for environmental awareness to occur and for issues like sustainability to be felt and experienced directly through the body. Eight "guideposts" are offered for examining aspects of the environment via crafting activities. The guideposts cover "origins" (whether or not to make something), seeking materials, harvesting materials, resonance of repetitive bodily movements, design and sensory involvement, utility and use, community celebration (cultural connections), and perceptions of scraps or remnants. Questions for reflection accompany each guidepost. (SV)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 438 136

Ref# C200298

October 1999

CRAFTING AS ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Zabe MacEachren

J. Bonnell

2A

Introduction

. . . Rachelda, a grade 6 student, cradles her new paddle in her arms like a baby as she informs me that she feels like dancing. I respond to her idea with a smile and then turn around to answer another student's question on what they should do next to complete their own paddle. I answer them and when I turn back, Rachelda is dancing down a trail towards the water; her completed paddle is her partner.

. . . I listen to two grade 8 boys chatting as they each sand the paddle they have just finished carving. One of them nods towards some unused cedar boards and says to the other "just think, these paddles were once one of them boards." The other replies "Uh-nn, this paddle was once one of them trees."

. . . With a group of campers around some ceremonial candles, we begin to reflect upon the two weeks we have all spent together at camp. Each camper describes the best thing that they have experienced at camp. Many of them state that their highlight was carving a spoon so they could eat their meals during the second week at camp when no metal utensils were allowed and the spoon became an essential component to their survival.

I frequently wonder what 'ingredients' go into making a craft, that can turn such a simple activity into an occasion to dance, a moment of introspection and connection, or highlight of two weeks of living out of doors. It was only after I had pondered numerous answers to questions about how I got involved in environmental education and what types of experiences connected me most with the Earth, did I start to reflect upon my own making experiences. Presently I am pursuing a Ph.D. in how crafting activities can serve as a practice for environmental awareness. My research involves trying to understand how making experiences shape our relationship and understanding of the natural world. I choose the term making to describe all activities which involve the creation of some item. I specifically use the term crafting to describe the process of making an item which

RC 022264

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

is considered useful, aesthetically pleasing, involves some amount of handiwork and has the potential for encouraging environmental awareness.

Through reflecting upon my own personal experience, examining myths and stories about making items, and studying the narrations of others who create, I have become better aware of the wide variety of forms making activities can take. I have sought to understand what specific characteristics of making activities can lead to or encourage different perceptions about nature. Making activities, (even those based at environmental education programs,) can involve a wide array of projects and materials, ranging from the strictly decorative to the useful, from plastic gimp to totally organic material.

In the early decades of the 19th century Ernest Thompson Seton, founder of the League of woodcraft Indians (which later became the Boy Scouts of America,) emphasized craft and nature study activities for youth. His 'birch bark roll' and woodcraft manuals were some of the first crafting activities specifically associated with nature study programs. Even today some camps and educational programs continue to connect art/handicraft/craft education with environmental education, but few of these programs provide any significant theory or justification as to why or how making experiences can serve as environmental education. Literature on making activities seldom includes any in depth analysis of environmental education.

David Orr states that one of the problems in education today is that science education has replaced environmental education. We no longer understand broad based ecological principles that involve concepts of good citizenship, instead we are focused on succeeding at specific tasks. We demonstrate a faith that all technology is good technology and will serve to solve our problems in the end. Philosophers of technology such as Ursula Franklin and Albert Borgmann explain how technology is distancing us from the artifacts in our life. Franklin discusses technology as the practice of doing something and describes how it has become increasingly prescriptive instead of holistic. Borgmann explains how technology has encouraged us to abandon the things in our lives which offer us engagement and to replace them instead with devices which only offer diversion with the world.

How is this trend of embracing technology to be limited, so that real meaningful experiences which engage us with the environmental can return? Philosophers like Morris Berman and David Abram suggest a solution resides in the return of sensory based experiences and full bodily involvement. This is were the ancient significance of crafting experiences returns. (It is interesting to note that Franklin, Borgmann and Berman all draw examples from crafting activities to explain and support their ideas.) Crafting activities are dependent upon sensory rich engagement and the mind submitting

to the body's awareness. Through crafting we must learn 'lessons from the land,' as we listen to the material we touch in order to succeed in our endeavors to create. The experience of trying to bend a branch, teaches our body about limits and balance in a manner which cannot be easily expressed in words or even represented in a computer program. Yet the ability to bend a branch into a hoop demonstrates some embodied sense of understanding and could be considered a demonstration of what something like sustainability might feel like. Many crafting experiences (like carving) encourage us to attend to and work with 'the grain.' Likewise something like crafting a clay pot can hold wisdom about local soil conditions and the power of fire.

But the world is full of items, all made by people and these items vary in the amount of environmental awareness they demonstrate. What aspects of the making process encourage us to attend to our senses, the area where our body intermingles with the natural world through touching the material? My research has shown that for crafters, the deepest connection with nature seems to come from experiences when a person walks into the natural world and is able to create a tool or item which is to be used. Richard Nelson's reflections upon snowshoe crafting with Yoyukon people and James Dina's own explorations of paddling in a birch bark canoe he crafted, are two exceptional narrations that explore the deeper aspects of what crafting experiences can provide in terms of environmental awareness.

Unfortunately few people ever have the opportunity to experience walking out onto the land, gathering materials, shaping them through the use of their own body and then using the item. The possibility of offering crafting activities to people living in an urban environment, attending a camp or an outdoor center may seem confined and limited by the size of the natural area and the impact it can absorb. But the alternative of simply obtaining purchased materials for making projects may be just providing the illusion that all is well in the distant land from which the purchased material originated. Well guided crafting experiences can aid participants to attend to the impact of the local natural environment and make connections with distant areas their personal choices of consumerism may effect.

A well developed crafting curriculum serves to provide a practice which encourages us to attend to the environment and it provides a context for knowing that is rooted in the body and senses. The environmental education that results from crafting experiences allows issues like sustainability and carrying capacity to be felt and experienced through the body and not just understood through the mind. Environmental education practitioners need to learn how to design or shift a making activity into a crafting activity that provides a context for environmental awareness to occur. Asking specific questions of participants may be all it takes to encourage deeper environmental awareness while craft-

ing. Environmental education programs need to ensure that they offer and shape crafting experiences that will immerse a person in the challenge of defining who they are by recognizing what they take and offer back to the natural world–the world which surrounds them and upon which they are ultimately a part and dependent.

What follows are what I call guideposts. They can serve as platforms on which to examine the perspectives of the environment offered by various making activities. They aided me in determining what hidden assumptions may reside in making activities run at environmental education programs ' established these guideposts after examining both my own personal experiences and others descriptions about their making experiences. These guideposts have offered me criteria by which to examine and develop crafting curriculum which explores a deeper relationship and connection with the natural world.

Each guidepost is named, outlined with a brief description and then followed by questions. The questions come from a critical exploration of ideas pertaining to making curriculum and are aimed at encouraging movement from a place of shallow understanding to one which may encourage a deeper awareness and offer new perspectives of the environment.

Origin–The origin guidepost is about the ideas which inform us whether we should or should not make something.

Should anything that we can imagine be created? Will the creation of an item allow us to fulfill a need or satisfy a want? To what extent should the toxicity, and long lasting effects of the materials involved, influence what we make? (i.e. Every time we use a plastic bead we must remember that its existence will survive our own? How should this awareness effect what we choose to create?) Are dreams, visions and/or our imagination inspired by a natural influence or an ego seeking recognition?

Seeking–The experience of traveling on the land in order to find materials for crafting purposes. The observations and knowledge that informs the patterns for determining how, when and where we will look for crafting materials.

How do we come to know the material when we encounter it in its natural environment compared to the material we can purchase in a store? (i.e. Is it a living tree or lumber?) What do we learn about the health of an ecosystem when we wander the land seeking a crafting supply? (i.e. Are specie populations increasing or decreasing?) What do we think about property relationships when we compare traveling on common, public or private land? (i.e. Can land trees, animals etc. ever be truly owned?) How did concepts of ownership originate? What value is placed on hard to obtain material which requires great physical effort in acquiring it? (i.e. How does the population of harvesters or the availability of technology influence harvesting impacts?) How have we learned to 'read'

the landscape or communicate with it so we feel guided towards the material we seek?

Harvesting–The experience and acts of expression surrounding the moment of actually taking another life form in order to procure the material needed by which to create something.

Are we acknowledging or recognizing (through any prayer, song, expression or gesture) that we are dependent upon other life forms? Do we recognize what we are harvesting as a sentient being and offer some form of expression or consolation for what we are taking? What are our personal and cultural manners of expressing gratitude and appreciation for the material we take from the land? Do we provide a small offering or token as an expression of understanding that a greater exchange is being sought? Do we harvest material with the same respect that we wish our own body would be treated? (E.g. using a quick clean cut to remove a tree branch (limb) instead of tearing it off.) What do we know about the criteria which determine when we have harvested enough and to take more would be harmful to future supplies. (i.e. What do we look for when determining how many plants can be sustainably harvested from a specific area, like an outdoor school center? What do we learn about the environment where crafting material originates when we purchase supplies at a store in comparison to harvesting it ourselves? How large a land base is required to provide for all the material artifacts we are accustomed to?) Does harvesting materials aid or encourage new growth?

Resonance of Movement–The perception of the repetitive moments involved in making something.

Are the repetitive motions involved in crafting perceived as a boring, tedious task which must be endured by the body, or as an opportunity to seek a rhythm of motion by blending the grain/fibers present in the crafting material and one's own physical being? Can one allow the repetition of movement to soften the busy mental activities of the mind, so a more meditative, rocking, relaxed state can become familiar to the body? Why is "crafting", "making" or "creating" so often considered a healing act?

Embodied Designing–The actual moment of forming and shaping which the crafting activity engages us in. The sensory involvement required by the processes.

Do we work from a master blueprint and never allow the material to inform our decisions, or does the material influence the outcome? (i.e. Does the desired form encourage us to go with the grain or against it during the making process?) How is our body informed by the material? What senses are involved and attended to? What are the challenges in expressing a sense instead of a thought? (E.g. bending wood allows the body to inform the mind when a limitation is reached. This experience encouraging us to trust what our body knows, yet may find difficult to acknowledge or express.) How does a

design express a cultural understanding of its landscape? (E.g. If building designs follow linear and angular floor plans, how do they convey or invite understanding about the importance of circles and cycles?)

Utility and Use–The distinguishing factors which reside between understanding and balancing the value of mental introspection and bodily engagement.

Does the item made continue to engage the body through use or does it only excite the mind through its limited function? Does the utility component of a made item move us into relationship with the land or only as a displayed item which is to be pondered? (E.g. Framed pictures are a representation of something which may encourage introspection and reflection of a past experience they also have a limited ability to continue to engage the body with the environment. i.e. What does a picture of canoeing offer in comparison to a paddle and canoe which hold the potential of an engagement with the environment—a real experience.)

Community Celebration–The cultural way by which we express our relationship with the land through the items we create and the manner by which we acknowledge our need to make in order to define who we are.

How is the importance of a craft in a culture expressed through stories, songs, dances and celebrations? (E.g. During the fur trade era many Canadians experienced a paddle and/or snowshoe dance. What perspectives about paddles and snowshoes did such dances offer their participants.) How do we as humans express our joy and/or skill at being able to make something? How can our expression move beyond a monetary value which might be exchanged in order to acquire an item? How do we convey the history of our ability to craft something?

Returning Back–The perceptions and actions which accompany the material remaining from the making process.

Do we perceive the by-products of our crafting activities as scraps or remnants? Do we dispose of them in a garbage, drain or recycling bin? Do we somehow ensure that they are returned to the natural processes of which they originated? (E.g. wood shavings being returned to the forest floor) How is our knowledge of what to do with these materials influenced by our perspectives about the land and/or original sources of these materials? (E.g. Many myths and traditional practices inform cultures what to do in regards to the artifacts they create.)

Closing Thoughts

By establishing crafting activities that recognize aspects of each of these guideposts, we are encouraging making experiences to become more holistic and less superficial.

Crafting activities can encourage participants to embrace and immerse themselves in a sensual relationship with the land, marvel at all its complexities and wonders, then rise to the challenge of exploring human's role on earth and what it means to live sustainably. By doing this we will be providing good environmental education.

The more we can engage ourselves with the questions surrounding these eight guideposts the more meaningful the experience of crafting can become. The items we encounter in our life will be better recognized as something that fulfills a need or a want, stems from a commodity or engagement based consciousness and aids our awareness of how all the artifacts in our lives stem from the materials the land provides. Such awareness may allow us to best answer questions like: how much can the earth continue to provide us and what does real sustainability mean? As we experience different crafting activities and continue to explore the various perspectives raised by each guidepost, we are encouraged to immerse ourselves deeper into the natural systems of earth; these are systems which we need to recognize and understand our own part in. This is what environmental education should be about and experiences such as crafting can provide this.

By carving a spoon and eating with it, shaping a bowl and cooking with it, whether weaving fibers or feeling the animal move through the leather protecting our feet, we are crafting an environmental education for our future.

References

Abram, David. (1996). The Spell of the Sensuous. New York: Vintage Books

Berman, Morris. (1989) Coming to Our Senses. London: Unwin Hyman Limited (chpt.1,3 &10)

Borgmann, Albert. (1984). Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life. The Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 101-107

Dina, James. (1989). Voyage of the Ant. Washington, Connecticut: Birdstone Publishers

Franklin, Ursula. (1992). The Real World of Technology. Concord, ON: House of Anansi Press Limited, 11-24

Keller, Betty. (1984). Black Wolf- The Life of Ernest Thompson Seton. Toronto: Douglas &McIntyre

Nelson, Richard. (1989) The Island Within. New York: Vintage Books, 54-60

Orr, David. (1994). Earth in Mind. Washington: Island Earth Press (12-33)

© 1999 by The Association for Experiential Education. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of the copyright owner. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policy of AEE.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE